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*Brundtland, Gro Harlem (b. 1939)*

## Brundtland, Gro Harlem (b. 1939)

*Anneke Ribberink*

In addition to being a famous prime minister of Norway in the 1980s and 1990s and the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO) (1998–2003), Gro Harlem Brundtland was an important leader of the environmental and feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Born in 1939 to a prominent family of social democrats, Gro Harlem grew up with politics. Her father, who became a cabinet minister twice in the 1950s and 1960s, was a physician who taught his children to care about the health of nature and of society. Gro Harlem's parents raised their children in an egalitarian way, without distinguishing between sons and daughters.

When Gro Harlem was a mature woman, she was convinced of the equality of men and women and of the social importance of good health. Like her father, she studied medicine and became a physician. As a university student in the early 1960s she discovered that sexism existed in society. Soon she was attracted to the feminist movement arising in that decade. As a physician

and as a social democrat she became an active member of the abortion rights movement, helping women who wanted to get an abortion in a time (before 1978) when it was not yet legalized in Norway. Because of her activism in the abortion rights movement and because of the fact that she repeatedly spoke out on environmental subjects, Brundtland was asked to become a cabinet minister for the environment by Prime Minister Trygve Bratteli in 1974. She remained in this position until 1979, when she had to leave Odvar Nordli's cabinet because of her outspoken feminist views.

Even before that time she had proven her significance to the environmental movement. In 1975 she became deputy leader of the Norwegian Social Democratic Party and in that position she fought for feminist and environmental objectives. She was able to convince her party, which had always been keen on fighting for social security, and for wages and jobs for workers, that environmental issues were important too. Under her command, the Arbeiderpartiet formulated policies to preserve the Hardangervidda wilderness, for a law on product control, and to strengthen the laws on pollution control and regulations on natural resources and real estate. Brundtland fought hard in the struggle against acid rain, an issue that was derided by some prominent scientists. The media began to refer to her as the green goddess. Her most important victory came in 1977, when her bold and effective actions prevented an accident with the Bravo, an oil platform in the North Sea that sprang a leak, from developing into a real disaster.

The international reward for her struggle in the environmental field came in 1983, when she became chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), set up by the United Nations. In 1987 this commission presented a report, *Our Common Future*, popularly known as the Brundtland report. It gave a scientifically substantiated proposal for dealing with worldwide environmental problems, in combination with fighting poverty and controlling economic growth. The concept presented by the commission, called sustainable development, has since been widely discussed and implemented in many countries, international bodies, and commissions. However, as prime

minister, Brundtland was criticized for the fact that her cabinet, which took pride in its environmental policy, gave the go-ahead in 1992 for resuming commercial whaling, despite strong international protests against this decision.

Brundtland is probably even better known for her achievements in the area of feminism than in the environmental field. She was Norway's first female prime minister (1981). On top of that she was the second female prime minister in Northwestern Europe. This was a victory for the feminist movement in itself, apart from how Brundtland was performing in her new position. In 1986 eight of the 18 ministers in her second cabinet were women. This was a first, and it made her the focus of international attention. Her most important measures as prime minister lay in the field of promoting the representation of women in all ranks of politics and civil bodies and in furthering the combination of household and caring tasks with a paid job. Extending parental leave and childcare were the marks of her performance.

These were all important goals of second wave feminism and in this way Brundtland was of great value to the feminist movement, but she also proved the validity of the feminist slogan "the personal is political" in her own life. When she married Arne Olav Brundtland in 1960 she got a partner with different political views: he was a convinced conservative until the late 1980s. But he was also one of the few husbands with a career of his own, who would support feminism not only in theory but in practice, too. He supported his wife in her career from the beginning, not only emotionally and by advising her on foreign affairs, but also by sharing with her the household duties and the care of their four children.

During her fourth term as prime minister Brundtland demonstrated sincerity and courage when at the 1994 UN Population and Development Conference in Cairo she publicly connected religion and the problems of population in developing countries by citing the role of the churches' condemnation of contraceptives and abortion. This speech caused her to be strongly attacked in the Egyptian fundamentalist press.

SEE ALSO: Ecological Protest Movements; Environmental Protest, Norway, 20th Century; International Women's Day

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